



Bluegrass Musician and Mandolin Craftsman

Louisiana is strongly identified with many styles of music such as Dixieland-style jazz and blues, country, zydeco, Cajun, and even rock. But one typically doesn't associate the Bayou State with bluegrass. Luke Thompson has been working for the past 40 years to change that. Luke's musical roots go back to his childhood in Natabany, Louisiana. Natabany is a sawmill town an hour-and-a-half drive east of Baton Rouge and north of New Orleans. Thompson's grandfather was an old-time fiddle player who encouraged Luke and his brother, Cecil, to nurture their musical talents. Both began as guitar players, but eventually moved on to other instruments. Luke first switched to a fiddle, then to a four-string banjo, and lastly to a mandolin. Cecil soon switched to a five-string banjo. Luke and Cecil's music was at first influenced by artists such as Eddy Arnold and Hank Williams. They then discovered the sound of Bill Monroe—an artist who would influence the Thompson boys' music from that point on. The early years were harsh and filled with disappointments interspersed with small successes. Both Luke and Cecil gave up the band at different times to work at other jobs that provided more security than the music business had to offer, but both found themselves drawn back to music time and again. Their first band was Green Valley Boys, but Luke found out the name was already being used by Carl Sauceman, and the band's name was changed to the Green Valley Cutups. The band played most of Bill Monroe's tunes, as well as country ballads throughout the late '40s and early '50s. Luke then left the band to work on the railroad. He later left the railroad and went to Kentucky, where he managed to land his own 15-minute daily radio show. After some hard economic times, Luke returned to Louisiana, where he teamed up once again with his old band. Luke and the band played on the Louisiana Hayride sporadically and in 1960, Luke recorded "I'm Lost Between the Falling Snow and Mountain, Sweetheart." The recording was seen as a success, though it did not crack the charts. Luke next directed his energies to helping promote bluegrass by helping Lester Hodge in originating the Old South Jamboree, which featured country and western music as well as bluegrass.

In 1968, Luke established the first bluegrass festival in the state, and it continued into the mid-1980s. In addition to being a fine musician, Luke Thompson has also come to be known as one of the finest craftsmen of mandolins and other musical instruments. This came about after Luke took a mandolin to a Gibson factory to have it repaired. Luke had done some custom inlay work on the headstock and the Gibson inspector informed Thompson that the mandolin was one of Gibson's custom mandolins. When Luke told the inspector that the inlay work was his own, the inspector tried to get Luke to go to work for the Gibson factory. However, family responsibilities resulted in Thompson's return to Louisiana. Eventually, Luke did sign a contract to build mandolins for the Gibson Company, and to this day he is considered to be one of the finest mandolin makers in the world. And although he'd rather be making music, Luke Thompson is kept busier making the fine instruments for which he is known.